The Development of the Use of Acidic Design in Poster Design

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Abstract. As a precursor to acid design, the "Baby Boomers" of the post-World War II era questioned America's materialistic, conservative cultural and political norms, and psychedelic music festivals and concerts became the most prominent feature of this period, influencing to some extent the design of band posters and album covers, as well as influenced psychedelic visual design. Therefore, the characteristics of psychedelic visual design are closely related to the Art Nouveau movement, Vienna Secession, Surrealism and Pop Art, and psychedelic visual design also has implications for the development of design today.

Keywords: Acid Design; Psychedelic Design; Characteristics.

1. Psychedelic Design

1.1 Psychedelic Design Development Background

Psychedelic visual design developed in the social environment of 19th century Europe, where Victorian aesthetics, the Art Nouveau movement and the rebellious liberal spirit of the Baby Boomers emerged. The Victorian period was a transitional period in society and the art world, with the Victorians' reverence for scientific belief in progress culminating in the Industrial Revolution in England. People shifted from reverence for faith and curiosity about the supernatural to personal spirituality and materiality. Despite the emergence of Romanticism, Impressionist art, and Post-Impressionism, the art world of the time was still very much academic.

The mutual friction between high art and low art gave birth to the New Culture movement, on the other hand, in order to resist and indict the nascent industrial products of the contemporary environment. The Art Nouveau movement seems to be one of the first movements to provoke anti-mainstream culture. This movement and the anti-mainstream culture share a common aesthetic in that they both transcend form and seek something deeper, just as psychedelic design seeks to transcend the senses and emotions of the viewer. The young baby boomers, dissatisfied with the rules and regulations of the society of the time, incorporated the spirit of freedom and flexibility into their own graphic design, with a myriad of changing patterns blending the typography of the Art Nouveau movement with the Viennese Secession style. 1960s saw the birth of the psychedelic visual design style in the perfect cradle of the counter-culture. Psychedelic design was born primarily in London and San Francisco, two cities that produced work with many distinct stylistic differences, but all of which were inseparable from the fantastic themes, kaleidoscopic and spiral patterns, bright colors, extreme details and eccentric typography that influenced the psychedelic designers of the Art Nouveau, Viennese Secession and Surrealist movements.

The wave of psychedelic visual design offered new ways of design, thinking and expression, while also causing a rethink of modern design. Although it did not become an international style as smoothly as modern art, it still exists today, and a new "psychedelic visual design" has emerged in conjunction with the current design context. For example, acid design, cyberpunk style, vaporwave style, etc.

The psychedelic trend has led to the birth of a number of designers:

1. Wes Wilson

Wes Wilson is an American artist and one of the most famous psychedelic poster designers, whose style was heavily influenced by the Art Nouveau movement and who defined the design style of a generation. Wes Wilson is best known for his work designing posters for the Bill Graham Rock Theater, a style he invented that is now synonymous with the peace movement, the psychedelic era and the 1960s. Wes Wilson also became famous in 1966 when he invented and popularized a psychedelic typeface inspired by Alfred Roller's block letters, in which the letters appear to move or
melt. The first poster that made him famous was a green poster with a flickering red flame-like font for The Association, which established Wes Wilson's place in 1960s design. (Fig. 1)

![Fig 1. Works by Wes Wilson](image1)

2. Victor Moscoso

Victor Moscoso is a Spanish artist known for producing psychedelic rock posters, commercials and underground comedy in San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s. He was the first rock poster artist to have formal academic training and experience in the 1960s. He was the first rock poster artist to use photographic collage in many of his posters, and Victor Moscoso drew much inspiration from comic books, Victorian imagery, the Art Nouveau movement and Pop Art. He used the concept of color vibration in many of his works to create a "psychedelic" effect, influenced by the painter Josef Albers. By 1968, Victor Moscoso had moved to work for the Underground Comics Company. (Fig. 2)

![Fig 2. Works by Victor Moscoso](image2)

3. Bonnie MacLean

One of the most famous female designers of the era was Bonnie MacLean, who worked alongside the "Big Five," creating posters and other artwork in the then iconic psychedelic art style to promote Fillmore West, the rock and roll theater managed by Bill Graham.

Bonnie MacLean had been painting bulletin boards in the auditorium in a psychedelic style and began creating posters after Wes Wilson quit Bill Graham. Her posters are "vivid hand-drawn tickets"
in the Art Nouveau style. Bonnie MacLean's style was inspired by medieval Gothic images, such as round stained glass windows and pointed arches. (As shown in Fig.s 3 and 4)

1.2 The Concept of Psychedelic Design

Psychedelic design, as the predecessor of acid design, created a new aesthetic experience in the 1960s. Psychedelic design created a new aesthetic experience based on the mutual melting of objects, shapes, lines, and fonts. It fused the concepts of surrealism, abstract expressionism, and pop art, and was a product of the unique aesthetic trend in the background of that era. In an era when the Internet was not developed, young people used such a mixed art form to give vent to their emotions and aesthetic concepts, and it was constantly adopted and renovated by today's modern design, changing according to demand into the "acid art" inspiration kernel of the 21st century.

2. Background of the Development of Acidic Design

Acid design is not a new thing, it has been born in San Francisco as early as the 1960s, when it was also a kind of psychedelic design, with dream-like bright colors, distorted lines, and seemingly disorganized collages, called "psychedelic design". The movement and the counter-culture shared an aesthetic that transcended form and sought something deeper, just as psychedelic design sought to transcend the senses and emotions of the viewer. The young baby boomers, dissatisfied with the rules and regulations of their society at the time, incorporated the spirit of freedom and flexibility into their own graphic design, with a thousand different patterns blending the typography of the Art Nouveau period and the Viennese Secessionist style. 1960s birthed the psychedelic visual design style in the perfect cradle of the counter-culture.

The collision of high art and low art led to the creation of a new cultural movement that simultaneously aimed to critique and overcome a new industrial reality. Art Nouveau seems to be one of the first movements to provoke a counter-mainstream culture.

2.1 What is Acid Design

What is acidic design? What does the word "Acid" conjure up for you? Is it the Acid House, Techno, Rave parties of the 1990s? Or the paisley psychedelic swirls and Op Art popularized by the hippie movement? While the term is mostly associated with a powerful trip to the psychedelic experience, it is actually a description that carries many meanings and carries a cultural resonance deeper than its noun form.
The English word for acid design is acid design, where the word "acid" refers to the common Western hallucinogen: (lysergic acid diethylamide). And not "sour" the mouth of the acid, but from the hallucinogen "LCD" in the composition of acid, therefore, acid also with a bit of psychedelic meaning. Acid design, what is "acid"? On the whole, acid design is visually disorienting, pioneering and sci-fi, often with repeated geometric shapes, distorted metallic textures, geometric and jagged fonts, full typography and saturated colors, which are also the main characteristics of acid design.

It is said that "fashion is a reincarnation", and when acid design becomes less niche and more of a trend, it is the moment when contemporary pioneering designers embark on a rebellious journey. In essence, acidic design is a replica of last century's pop culture, which looks trendy at the moment, but is in fact a purely retro design of the last century. Acid design can also be seen as a bridge between the slightly contradictory keywords of retro and sci-fi in a psychedelic world, which seems somewhat indistinguishable in today's fast-moving, fluid world: retro? Or science fiction? It can be understood in this way: it is the retro in the eyes of the contemporary, the science fiction in the eyes of the former. Such as the popular killing horse, Mars text, has become many 80s, 90s self-deprecating, reminiscent of the past. And acid design is the contemporary people use retro elements to try to show the sense of technology design form.

2.2 Hippie Culture

Hippie culture originated from pop art, an international pop culture that emerged in the 1950s under the influence of modern American culture. Most of the materials are well-known images in society, reflecting the characteristics of popular, reproduction and fun. A representative work is Andy Warhol's iconic painting "Marilyn Monroe", which takes the star Marilyn Monroe as its subject, and the screen printing technology makes this work reproducible and popular. In the color treatment, various highly saturated colors make the picture bright with strong contrast in chromaticity. It creates an experiential relationship between the viewer and the image in a rational and orderly space (Fig. 5).

Fig 5. Poster work from the Pop period

2.3 Youth Culture at the End of the 19th Century

Against the tide of industrialization, the Art Nouveau movement of the late 19th century and the Vienna Secession defined how to create a seemingly decadent "end-of-the-century" culture in terms of both form and spirit - anti-order, anti-classical, against all stereotypical rules, exploring a wide range of images in love, lust, and pleasure (Fig. 6).
2.4 Surrealism

In the 1920s, Surrealist painters explored the dream world and the subconscious with their brushes, giving psychedelic visual design a concept that subverted the fixed cosmic order; they were unconventional, dreamy in character, and provided excellent material for the designers in San Francisco who were immersed in hallucinogens to express their visions (e.g. Fig. 7).

3. Characteristics of Acidic Design

Today, there is a new understanding of the "acidic plane" as a new wave of contemporary designers inject a sense of the future into this nostalgic, utopian metaphor. A dazzling array of rendered graphics and 3D objects are being used, a miasma of neon colors, experimental liquid metal typefaces (often
warped or upside down, with a liquid metal appearance), Opulent patterns, and sci-fi futuristic anti-utopian scenarios are being incorporated into the designs.

When people see the acidic design, their first impression may be weird, or even a little ugly, after all, the designer is expressing personal emotions, not to please people's retinas.

This kind of picture like from "suffering from mental illness" also has its own characteristics, regularity, different textures, high saturated colors, the use of various types of retro technology elements, is a necessary part of the psychedelic visual design. The works have their own unique visual impact.

3.1 Element

Acid design images are usually dominated by objects and elements that bring a sense of retro - such as tapes (e.g. Fig. 8), CD discs, fading neon lights, all kinds of old computers, sci-fi elements from old movies, and metallic forms of water, so acid design can give a retro feel in addition to a perceived sense of technology (e.g. Fig.s 9 and 10).

3.2 Texture

The acidic design makes extensive use of glass, metal, laser, plastic and sandstone to convey a sense of the future that belongs in old movies, old computers and old spaceships from the last century. As if capturing the spiritual world of people living in the last century life, it visualizes the cyberpunk formed in their minds and has a hard-core sense of technology coming out. (As in Fig. 13)
Fig 11. Acid design style poster

Fig 12. Acid design style poster

Fig 13. Acid design style poster

3.3 Color

Fig 14. Acid design style poster "colorful black"
Highly saturated colors cause a great visual impact fluorescent color, black, gray, silver, purple, orange used more, and mainly dark colors as the background color, high saturation of light colors as bright colors to light up the picture. The picture is rich in color, designers present a "colorful black" (Fig. 14), such a technique to change in more, more layers, all kinds of elements flying around the picture to hold down the line.

3.4 Font

The typeface in the acidic design remains consistent with its concept, with the same unconventional and extensive use of distorted, even slightly chaotic, distorted fonts, aided by a variety of confusing geometric shapes (e.g., Fig. 15).

3.5 Layout

Fig 15. Acid design style poster

Fig 16. Acid design style poster
Although it is claimed that there are no rules, the wild arrangements and nonsensical collages are the "rules" of acidic design. Also in the layout, disorder and confusion are its characteristics, and a neat and orderly arrangement defeats the original purpose. (Fig. 16)

4. The Contemporary Use of Acidic Design

This kind of outrageous, disconnected from the norm, "alternative design" that sounds "sour", why can become a splash of color under the designer's pen?

Acid design has a sense of "pioneering" in its own characteristics, and pioneering designers build a bridge between acid design and contemporary young people, and this sense of "pioneering" coincides with young people's pursuit of trends and extraordinary mentality. And the retro and science fiction characteristics of acidic design can be naturally integrated with various current fields, and because of its unique visual expression, it is beginning to be favored by more and more brands and parties. Especially for products with young audiences - such as sneakers, electro music festival posters, etc.

The reason why we call it a style is because there is a stage that it sings itself. It is a big show in the spiritual world, fashion trends, and technical science fiction.

4.1 Hugo Hoppmann

In the field of design, there is a visual aesthetic known as "Acid Graphic". This style of design is similar to the visual experience of psychedelic substances, often presented in recurring geometric shapes or highly saturated colors. Over the past few decades, this acid aesthetic has embraced a "free love" social proposition, and contains an extreme hedonism that is almost obsolete in today's world. Designer and art director Hugo Hoppmann, who collaborated with 032c magazine, has described the "acidic plane" - a style created by modern tools with a "super hip" Hoppmann defines graphic designer David Rudnick as the original touchstone of the genre, one that many designers have sought to emulate and emulate, through super-vibrant typography and crazy fonts with a heavy metal aesthetic. Hoppmann says, "A lot of the design work that people see in this genre is based on David's original work."

4.2 David Rudnick

Fig 17. David Rudnick's tour visual poster for music producer Evian Christ
David Rudnick is not actually a design school graduate. After graduating from Yale University with a degree in art history and philosophy, the self-taught designer founded the music magazine Volume, and in the process amassed a number of music industry clients and funds. Known for his intricate and deep geometric shapes and jagged typefaces, he has become a regular designer for a variety of record labels, music labels, clubs and trendy brands. It was the proliferation of his creations in both the underground and mainstream markets that made this design trend a natural one, attracting more young designers to study his typography, color and type design. Yet the trend that caught fire in the age of social networking was inevitably fueled by the Internet and social platforms. Graphic design works incorporating the style were shared and tagged by designers in large numbers, driving the spread and fermentation of this type of design style on social networking sites. (Fig. 17, 18)

Fig 18. David Rudnick’s poster for Turbo Records

4.3 Digital Designer Luigi Brusciano

Fig 19. A work shared by @acidgraphix from Instagram account
Digital designer Luigi Brusciano created a dedicated Instagram account in 2018 dedicated to collecting and showcasing this style of design. At the time Brusciano noticed that this visual style of design was becoming popular and created the account @acidgraphix specifically to showcase related work and accept tagged submissions from readers to actively share and present this still undefined genre of style, while also defining it visually in a sense. (Fig. 19)

For Brusciano, the term “acid print” is largely interconnected with retro technology, electronic music and rave party flyer design, and its proliferation is tied to the speed of the Internet and evolving design trends. He believes that many creatives are at a point where they want to break the rules of graphic design altogether, just as the rave party flyer did in the 1990s. Anja Kaiser, another German designer who has been described as an icon of the acidic design style, has expressed similar sentiments, describing her own work as often characterized by “interrupted typefaces, distorted layouts, diverse compositions and vibrant colors,” although she says she is not familiar with the term “acidic. The word "acidic" doesn't stop her from finding the descriptor interesting: "I like to visualize the concept in a pungent and acidic way," she says. Kaiser believes "acidic" can be used as a strategy to present subjective emotions, such as emphasizing a state of visual dissonance, chaos and coexistence,” she says, eschewing the hallucinogenic connotations of the word. She continues, "Eurocentric graphic design is dominated by market-driven rules that include a desire for simplicity and clarity. I think an acidification strategy might be a way to challenge these notions.” (As shown in Fig. 20).

**Fig 20.** Anja Kaiser’s poster design

4.4 Rudmer van Hulzen

**Fig 21.** Poster designed by Studio Cryo for the party label
Rudmer van Hulzen, art director of Dutch creative agency G2K, also defined the acidic plane once, "Challenging traditional definitions of beauty and desire is at the heart of the acidic plane." Hulzen continues, "While many people may think these works are ugly, if you look closely at how they are made, the goals of their creation and their user groups, you will see that they are deliberately so and have their own aesthetics. Plus, you don't need chemical stimulation to see their beauty." (As shown in Fig 21, 22)

Fig 22. Exhibition site of music club poster design curated

Fig 23. Poster for Xerox Corporation
Believing that music club poster design has always been at the forefront of graphic design in terms of trends, experimentation and innovation, he also curated an exhibition showcasing music club poster design in 2019, featuring a range of work from designers and studios such as Studio Cryo, Studio Feixen, Anna Kulachek, Bráulio Amado and Jonathan Castro, among other designers and studios. In his opinion, posters that make a strong statement in the acidic genre trend owe more to its punk attitude than to defining it as a revival of 90s psychedelic hedonism. "Acid graphic design is very similar to the DIY aesthetic and its core metaphor conveyed by Xeroxed's hardcore punk flyers of the '80s and '90s-'going against the grain" (e.g., Fig. 23). However, this core concept has also led to the "acid design" style being more at home in the music industry, which allows for a relatively free voice, and various electronic musicians, clubs and record labels are happy to work with such designers to make a different voice through this visual style. At the same time, some design magazines, trendy brands, or offline and online cultural platforms are also actively inviting pioneering designers in the industry to create eye-catching visual identity systems for them.

4.5 Japanese Designer GUCCIMAZE

GUCCIMAZE, a designer living in Japan, is also defined as one of the masterminds behind the development of acidic design style trends. He specializes in taking inspiration from different languages and reintegrating fonts, visual elements and shapes to transform them into mysterious designs. Clients from all over the world have come to him, musician Nicki Minaj, magazine Tunica, etc. have asked him to handle the visuals of albums or magazines (Fig. 24).

Among the various design elements of the acidic style, geometric and jagged typefaces are particularly popular with designers and the cultural industry. These fonts are given 3D textural effects such as spaceship-like silver, watery iridescence, polished frosted black, and even the curve of a molten lead pipe dripping with water drops. They are known as "Liquid Metal". In recent years, liquid metal has been actively used by creatives designing for the cultural industry, and musicians, footwear brands and media outlets that focus on youth culture have been important clients of the style, with magazines such as Dazed, Tunica and 032c using it in their websites, magazines and online promotional materials.

Notably, designers are not just reviving the 3D and gradient effects of the late 1990s, but are innovating this nostalgic visual approach based on new digital technologies, developing new
approaches to design through the use of multiple media. The "liquid metal" graphics and typeface not only create a futuristic atmosphere, but also rebel against the minimalist trend in design.

4.6 Peruvian Designer Jonathan Castro

Among the contributors to the "acid design" trend, it's not hard to distinguish between copycat designs that follow the trend and unique designs based on specific research and concepts, and here we have Jonathan Castro, a Peruvian designer whose bold and distinctive use of color, solid fundamentals and a lot of experimental creations have brought him some influence and also attracted a series of corresponding music industry clients. (Fig. 25-27)

![Fig 25. Jonathan Castro's visual for online live music label Boiler Room](image1)

![Fig 26. Jonathan Castro designed the New Rave event poster](image2)

![Fig 27. Jonathan Castro's visual design for 032c magazine](image3)
When we look closely at Castro's work, we find that his approach is much more than just a reference to the popular "acid design" style; his designs also carry a diversity of cultures and concepts behind them. By returning to his roots in Peru, he tries to restore his original understanding of graphic design through the use of elements such as black metal and punk graphics, and to reimagine the possibilities of graphic design in his experiments.

Studio Cryo's Gavrilovas has said, "As with anything that becomes popular, the acidic design style will slowly integrate into mainstream design. When it becomes less 'underground', designers who are looking for something new and different will find something else that is antithetical and contradictory to the mainstream."

5. Future Trends in Acid Design

From the perspective of design itself, acidic design is formally a rebellion against the mainstream aesthetic values of today, exploring new aesthetic boundaries and "rebelling" against the popularity of various types of minimalist, minimalist and sexually cool styles for many years. The chaotic order of acidic design is formally the opposite of the pursuit of simplicity and clarity in many contemporary works. This mix of "retro and future", "psychedelic", "chaotic" style, as well as exaggerated colors and patterns of the design form so that young people become its loyal audience. A large number of music festival posters, peripherals and cultural shirts have adopted this fresh design style. In the process of commercialization, it is not difficult to see through the "acidic" shell to the "psychedelic" core of the spiritual attitude that the young generation in China wants to express today (Fig. 21-26).

Because of the complexity of the context in which it takes place, acidic design is also a fusion of many other artistic styles. Although it may seem complex, it has a clear visual design identity. So much so that there are still artists today who are heavily influenced by the psychedelic designs of the 1960s, such as the dreamy visual design works produced by Aaron Lowell Denton, a designer and illustrator from Indiana, USA. One notable work is his album cover design for the Leon Bridges/Khruangbin LP release, Texas Sun, which is based on Denton's thorough study of psychedelic design, so the work is characterized by psychedelic contrasts in color and flowing lines, conveying sound visuals through abstract images. Another visual designer deeply influenced by psychedelic design is Kiryk Drewinski, from Berlin, Germany, who is also a musician and composer. The organic form of typography, especially influenced by Wes Wilson's psychedelic fonts, can be seen in his designs.

![Fig 28. Psychedelic style design](image)

![Fig 29. Psychedelic style design](image)

Although there is a strong connection between the original psychedelic design and hallucinogens, its typical design features and design ideas are still relevant to later artistic development. Not only in
terms of hand-drawing or graphic design, but also in terms of combining new media technology applications for associative mapping is a new possibility, and psychedelic visual design can still provide noteworthy artistic support for future art creation.

It is interesting to note the similarities between the hippie era and contemporary China. Both were in a time of rapid socio-economic development, technological production and educational advances, and a time when young people were more concerned with their inner feelings and the desire to further express their individuality. The way of life and work is completely different from that of their parents, and the attitude of life generated by "naked resignation" and "lying flat" are constantly in the news, which clearly express the personality and attitude of the younger generation. (Fig. 28-30)

![Fig 30. Psychedelic style design](image)

6. Summary

From the psychedelic design to the strong visual expression of the acidic plane, all highlight a "pioneering" attitude. This is in line with the mindset of young people who are chasing individuality and seeking to be different. The imagination and vitality of young people are always so rich and gorgeous, and their real-life situation forms a unique cultural atmosphere and attitude to life, which eternally injects new vitality into the mainstream aesthetics and the development of society.

Although acidic design is not "sour", it is a seasoning, a sour and strong visual stimulus for the current aesthetic. design fields seem to come back into vogue every 20 years. When it gets copied a lot, people get bored with it. Therefore, it has to evolve."

Perhaps the key thing for designers is to learn to take a step backwards in popular aesthetic trends and paradigms, to go back to their roots and think about what they can offer to the field that is unique to the table, and to keep letting go of new and interesting experimentation in order to really bring about change and even trends.

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